

THE WAR

Peace Talks Again in Paris

THROUGH the long years of the Viet Nam War, the U.S. has repeatedly been assured that one more turn of the screw, one more push of escalation would bring the enemy to the negotiating table in earnest at last, if not to his knees. Now the enemy is coming once more to the table; top North Vietnamese Negotiator Le Duc Tho returns to Paris this week presumably to resume the secret sessions with the U.S. that were broken off last November. But it is not exactly on the terms that Washington wanted. It is the enemy that has escalated; it is the U.S. that is in need of an agreement. With American ground troops out of action and U.S. options more limited than ever, President Nixon's Vietnamization policies and perhaps his re-election prospects are on severest trial.

The battlefield situation is grave. While the South Vietnamese have

French and then the Americans (see THE WORLD).

Faced with that grim prospect, Nixon went on TV to talk tough. "All that we have risked and all that we have gained over the years now hangs in the balance," he said. "We will not be defeated and we will never surrender our friends to Communist aggression." He repeated the familiar threat that "a bloodbath" would follow if North Viet Nam took over in Saigon. He reiterated a theme employed by every Administration that has been involved in the war: "If one country armed with the most modern weapons can invade another nation and succeed in conquering it, other countries will be encouraged to do the same thing." But he carefully pinned all the prognostications that the South Vietnamese would hold in the present crisis on the evaluation of his commander on the scene, General Creighton Abrams.

Right or wrong, the words have been played so many times over for a war-weary American public that they seemed emptied of meaning, a kind of litany of the Viet Nam nightmare. But at the same time, Nixon said that he would continue to withdraw troops from South Viet Nam, though at a slower rate. In the next two months, 20,000 will go. Nixon also announced that he was resuming the Paris peace talks, "not simply in order to hear more empty propaganda and bombast from the North Vietnamese, but to get on with the constructive business of making peace." He expected progress to be made "through all available channels."

The President was apparently responding to Soviet Party Boss Leonid Brezhnev's offer to Henry Kissinger. The Kissinger mission had been conducted with the usual successful secrecy. Like a contemporary Scarlet Pimpernel, the unpredictable foreign policy adviser had casually sauntered into a Georgetown salon one evening as if he did not have a care in the world. When the party was over, he jumped into a limousine and was driven to Andrews Air Force Base, where he took off for Moscow. Lodged in a spacious villa with an expansive view of the Moscow River and the city beyond, Kissinger spent parts of three days with Brezhnev.

Precisely what the two men agreed on is still secret, but evidently it was enough to encourage the White House to refrain from bombing Hanoi and Hai-

phong for a time. But not enough to discourage Moscow from doubling arms shipments through Haiphong.

One negotiating possibility is that the North Vietnamese will accept an offer made earlier by the President and rejected by them: the withdrawal of all U.S. forces by a fixed date in return for a cease-fire and the release of prisoners of war. Now that the North has occupied parts of the South, it has picked up more bargaining chips and may be willing to settle for a cease-fire—a prospect that the Administration views with some anxiety. Kissinger has been led by the Russians to expect, one way or another, some kind of breakthrough by the May 22 Moscow summit.

Leverage. Meanwhile Nixon must keep his eye on his other front, at home. So far, domestic criticism has not got out of hand. In his speech, he warned that the Communists might try to win their victory by persuading Congress or the public of the futility of the war. This was also a familiar plea—perhaps calculated to blunt criticism—but it seems to be effective. One of the Senate's formidable doves, Senator George Aiken, even counseled Nixon critics "not to encourage this war to go on, not to take the side of the enemy."

Yet time is surely running out in Viet Nam. Nixon's Vietnamization policy must be one of the most complicated balancing acts in the history of diplomacy. Never in the annals of modern warfare has a nation tried to win a war—or at least stave off defeat—while withdrawing its troops from battle. The President has apparently shown more confidence in public than he has in private. Another batch of classified documents leaked to the press last week reveals that the CIA, the State Department and the Pentagon all cast serious doubt on current policies back in 1969. In a forthcoming book, *Catch the Falling Flag*, Richard Whalen, a former Nixon speechwriter, asserted that Nixon had had deeper misgivings about the war than most people knew. After learning of a pessimistic study of the war given to L.B.J., Nixon told advisers in March 1968: "There's no way to win the war. But we can't say that, of course. In fact, we have to say the opposite just to keep some degree of bargaining leverage."

The White House still thinks it has sufficient leverage. Kissinger believes that the North Vietnamese offensive is the prelude to serious negotiations that will finally bring the war to a mutually acceptable conclusion, though what that may consist of is as obscure as ever. There is little evidence that the Communists feel any urgency to accept what they have turned down before. It would obviously be in the interests of the North Vietnamese to make such a hash of the President's policies on the battlefield that he would be defeated for reelection and replaced by a dovish Democrat. The initiative at the moment, as the North Vietnamese still rests with the North Vietnamese.



Henry Kissinger leaving home in Washington; Le Duc Tho arriving in Paris; a North Vietnamese tank in battle near Quang Tri.

fought bravely in some sectors, they have caved in elsewhere. The North Vietnamese, heavily supplied by the Soviet Union, are driving hard for Kontum in the Central Highlands, toward Quang Tri near the coast, and are menacing Hué. As the Communists approach urban centers, the U.S. faces another painful decision: whether to continue its air and artillery support at the cost of civilian lives in the cities. The open aggression has signaled a third Indochina war, and it could drag on as inconclusively, as described by Kissinger, as the earlier two wars that engaged first the

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Judgment on War: Dumbfounding Incompetence

What I want to know is: Why have we known so little? Why have we misjudged so gravely? I ask the questions, at this point, clinically, without prejudice to any future right to give way to anger.

One week ago the President of the United States told the entire country and the entire world that the invasion of South Vietnam would be repulsed, that that was the solid military judgment of Gen. Creighton Abrams.

Today the South Vietnamese are almost everywhere in tatters, the millions of pounds of bombs we continue to dump over North Vietnam and much of South Vietnam appear to be about as related to stopping the North Vietnamese offensive as underground atomic explosions in Amchitka. One province is gone, another teeters at the brink, the refugees swarm out of the cities in such numbers as the Chinese did during the 30s fleeing the Japanese, the South Vietnamese army falls apart, whole regiments and divisions become nothing more than journalistic

abstractions. Why didn't we know? Anticipate it? Warn against it?

There are many cases to be made against President Nixon, but let us confine ourselves to the one that says simply: With all his experience, with his knowledge of the dozen times his predecessor ventilated an optimism which proved to be inopportune to the point of being macabre, what did he do to overhaul the means by which he got his information?

Is it the fault of Gen. Abrams, who was there before President Nixon was elected? What is the nature of Abrams' misestimates: Was it on the morale of the South Vietnamese that he guessed wrong? If so, why did he guess it wrong? Did he make enough allowances, in his estimates, for the morale factor? If not, why not? Did the Defense Department probe the matter, or simply accept the estimates of the commander in the field? Did the CIA contribute to the estimate? When, early in Nixon's term, the CIA advised that Vietnamization would not

work, were its arguments confuted, if so by whom, using what arguments, what analysis?

Or was it the military strength of North Vietnam that we misestimated. The President told us that it was last October that we discovered that the enemy was preparing for a great offensive. Indeed: Did we know on what scale the enemy was preparing? Did our intelligence services perform usefully? Did we weigh the amount of equipment being off-loaded from the Soviet freighters? Did we know the nature of the material? Did we infer the uses to which it would be put? Did we organize our defenses, given the assumptions, competently?

There are many things to be focused upon in the next weeks, having to do with the consequences of what is happening in Vietnam, but one of them surely is the dumbfounding incompetence of our calculations. We have been made to sound like Nicholas II, confidently advising the court that

the imperial navy would knock out Japan in three weeks.

How many other mistakes, and miscalculations, have we made, are we relying on? As we have sat in Helsinki playing poker, have we proceeded on the basis of information put together by the same people who put together the information on which we have relied in Vietnam? President Thieu has gotten around to firing a couple of generals. Will we?

Do we need to completely revamp our intelligence system? What about the State Department? And of course the Army.

There are a lot of people who, after assimilating the loss of South Vietnam and the victimization of those South Vietnamese who fought because we told them on network TV that we would never let them go down, are going to ask the hard technical questions, and they are not going to spare the army, indeed they may very well not spare the commander-in-chief, and I'm not so sure they should.